

Representative Luxenberg, Senator Moore, and members of the Housing Committee:

My name is Thomas Birmingham. I am a resident of New Haven, and I am testifying in strong support of a rent cap.

The only reason that I haven't faced a rent increase this year is that as a Yale student, I exist at the epicenter of privilege in this state, with housing provided by the 40-billion-dollar-endowed university. With a five-minute walk outside this bubble, however, my sight changes. I start to see a city full of people who are being perpetually exploited by some of the most powerful landlords in this state.

Recently, I did some digging on New Haven's property database through my work as a journalism student. So today, I'd like to focus on just one of these landlords: Ocean Management.

I was able to look at records from over 300 New Haven buildings owned by Ocean, which amounted to over 1,000 units. These records revealed that since 2015, there have been at least 2,471 housing code violations at these Ocean properties. Since 2015, that's a new violation almost every single day.

In the hours upon hours I've spent knocking on doors in this city, I've had to learn exactly what one of these 2,471 violations can mean. It means that if you're a retired couple on Carmel Street, you can live for over a year with a bathroom full of mold all because Ocean won't answer the phone. If you're a single mother on Shelton Avenue, you can find your daughter among the rubble of a collapsed ceiling, and be told that Ocean isn't going to do anything to help. If you're a group of tenants on Blake Street, you can walk around your building to find broken smoke detectors, broken heating, broken electrical systems, broken dryers, and broken windows, and all the while Ocean is nowhere to be found.

I tell you all of this because at last week's rent cap hearing, members of this committee repeatedly asked tenants "if your rent is going up and there are violations, isn't that something that can be dealt with by existing local housing agencies?" I'm here to tell you today that nobody in New Haven is stopping Ocean right now. Nobody, including the housing code agency, is stopping them from raising rents on these tenants as high as they please, at any time, for any reason, even as they allow these thousands of violations to occur. Nobody. I've included the full Yale Daily News Magazine article detailing the inadequacy of our housing code agency in my written testimony and I would encourage all of you to read it.

As it is written now, SB4 would be a first step, and nothing more. Some changes which I believe are necessary to strengthen this bill include:

- **First, enacting a 2.5% rent cap**, which would be affordable and predictable to tenants like Ocean's and is in line with the rate of increase pre-COVID.
- **Second, including vacant apartments in that cap** so Ocean can't simply push out tenants in order to increase rents.

- **Third, expanding good cause eviction protections** to stop Ocean from arbitrarily tossing out tenants at the end of their lease terms.

You, the members of this committee, are the ones responsible for putting a check on this power. If you do not choose to act now, the continuous exploitation inflicted on Ocean tenants, of which there are thousands, will be on your hands as much as Ocean's. So I hope we can count on you.

Thank you.

Full Article: <https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2023/02/24/the-death-of-the-livable-city/>